The Familiar Face of Harm: Intimacy, Violence and the Enduring Legacy of Classical Literature.

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Introduction

Nineteenth-century classical literature makes it possible to approach violence within intimate and familial relations not as a collection of isolated tragedies or moral deviations, but as a stable social mechanism governed by its own logic of reproduction. This logic manifests itself not primarily through extreme acts of coercion, but through the conditions under which violence becomes possible, socially permissible, and—crucially—unrecognizable as violence.

It is precisely in this respect that the analytical relevance of classical literature lies. It reveals not only how violence emerges, but why it remains unrecognized as a problem until it reaches extreme, criminally legible forms. The social order is structured in such a way that destruction can unfold within the bounds of normativity—without legal transgression, without public conflict, and without the stigmatization of those who benefit from the process.

Contemporary societies often describe violence in terms of discrete episodes, individual responsibility, and psychological consequences. Numerous forms of assistance, intervention, and support exist; however, these measures tend to

remain fragmented and rarely address the conditions that allow violence to retain social compatibility. As a result, attention is focused on moments of rupture, while the underlying mechanism continues to operate unnoticed—through everyday forms of dependency, resource redistribution, and normative justification.

Classical literature captures this mechanism in its integrity, prior to its later fragmentation into specialized discourses, legal formulas, and therapeutic vocabularies. It enables us to observe the coordinated functioning of family structures, economic dependence, moral expectations, and legal order as a single configuration within which destruction can occur without recognition and appropriation can take place without a name.

The absence of contemporary terminology for violence in nineteenth-century literature does not indicate a lack of analytical precision. On the contrary, classical texts register social mechanisms before their conceptual naming—at a moment when these mechanisms fully coincide with the norm and therefore do not register as problematic. This is precisely what makes them particularly valuable for contemporary analysis: they allow us to see not only extreme manifestations of harm, but the very order within which such manifestations become possible and permissible. In this sense, classical literature functions not as an archive of moral narratives, but as an analytical instrument for the present—especially necessary given that modern frameworks of assistance and interpretation tend to engage only once a critical threshold has already been crossed.

The passage of time does not diminish the analytical value of these observations. On the contrary, comparison between classical material and contemporary contexts demonstrates that while forms and languages change, the underlying mechanism remains largely intact. Violence continues to remain socially compatible so long as it does not disrupt the appearance of order, and exit from it remains insufficiently established as a normative scenario.

This text adopts an analytical position according to which violence within intimate and familial relations should be understood not as a deviation or a contingent failure, but as a reproducible regime sustained by the structure of the social order itself. The task of analysis is not moral evaluation of characters, nor reconstruction of their inner experience, but the identification of the mechanisms through which destruction becomes imperceptible and appropriation becomes legitimate.

The relevance of nineteenth-century literature lies precisely in this capacity to register violence not only at the level of events, but at the level of perception. Classical texts do not merely depict harm; they expose the conditions under which harm becomes intelligible, tolerated, or misrecognized as care, duty, or affection. For this reason, their analytical value does not diminish with historical distance. While the legal language, institutional forms, and moral vocabularies have changed, the underlying mechanism—by which violence remains socially compatible so long as it does not disturb the appearance of order—continues to operate. What these texts reveal is not a historical anomaly, but a durable structure whose movement remains recognizably similar in contemporary contexts.

The Production of the Victim Prior to the Act of Violence

In Tess of the d'Urbervilles, violence does not originate with the figure of an immediate aggressor. The object of analysis here is not the classification of forms of violence, but the observation of how the social order responds to the erosion of female status and which consequences it renders durable. Violence is preceded by a decision taken within the family and justified by socially acceptable considerations—economic necessity, status anxiety, and belief in predestined fate. What is at stake is not malicious intent, but action carried out entirely within the bounds of normativity.

The victim does not emerge retrospectively; she is produced in advance. The body and life trajectory of the individual are incorporated into a survival framework prior to the commission of any violent act. Responsibility is distributed in such a way that it cannot be located at any single institutional point: the decisions and actions of all involved parties—excluding the direct act of violence itself—remain socially acceptable, while their cumulative outcome is regularly reproduced within the existing social order.

The Impossibility of Exit and the Illusion of Choice

If in Tess of the d'Urbervilles the social order produces the victim prior to the establishment of a stable regime of violence, the story of Nancy reveals a subsequent phase of the same mechanism—one in which vulnerability has already been consolidated, and exit persists only in the form of an abstract

possibility.

In The Adventures of Oliver Twist, the conversation between Nancy and Rose Maylie unfolds against the background of an already established social reality. By the time this scene occurs, the system has repeatedly demonstrated its inability to perform a protective function with respect to the most vulnerable figures: pregnant and starving women, children, orphans, and those deprived of family and material resources. These groups are presented not as exceptions, but as structurally produced elements of the social order.

Crucially, however, this incapacity does not manifest itself as an absence of institutional intervention. On the contrary, the system is fully operative—through workhouses, prisons, administrative measures, and public moral condemnation. The problem lies in the nature of this intervention: it does not dismantle vulnerability, but translates it into other, socially legitimate regimes of coercion. Seeking assistance does not constitute an exit from violence, but rather a transition from a private to an institutionalized form of pressure.

It is within this context that Nancy's position becomes intelligible. Dickens' narrative is equally attentive to the internal consequences of this order. Nancy's understanding of intimate relations is itself shaped within a regime of emotional deprivation and social coldness, in which affection is not encountered as care but as control. In such conditions, cruelty becomes normalized as a distorted substitute for love, not because violence is desired, but because no alternative emotional grammar has been made available. Loneliness here functions not as a private feeling, but as a structural condition that actively

trains the victim to misrecognize brutality as attachment. She belongs to a group that is not primary within the system of vulnerability, but derivative: a woman previously deprived of protection, socially discredited, and therefore excluded from mechanisms of protection. If the system proves incapable of safeguarding those whose vulnerability is recognized as original and indisputable, it is even less capable of offering an effective exit to those whose condition is interpreted as the result of "error," "fall," or deviation.

Under these conditions, the formal availability of alternatives does not negate their functional inadequacy. Exit remains as an abstract possibility, but is not institutionalized as a realizable scenario. Immobility in this context should not be understood as the result of subjective weakness or moral dependence, but as a rational adaptation to an order in which any attempt at exit entails a transition into another regime of coercion rather than liberation.

It is therefore significant that the possibility of assistance appears exclusively within the private sphere—as an individual initiative grounded in compassion, rather than as a function of a reproducible social order. Nancy's remark that the presence of more people like Rose might alter the situation does not indicate her isolation. Rather, it registers an awareness of the mass character of her condition and, simultaneously, the evident fact that institutional assistance is not only incapable of breaking this cycle, but is itself part of the mechanism that produces vulnerable figures.

Economic Appropriation as the Infrastructure of Violence

Violence within structures of intimacy, as recorded in classical literature, manifests not only through physical coercion or moral humiliation, but through a stable, normalized practice of appropriation—of money, labor, dowries, social name, inheritance, and the right to one's own biography. Within this logic, the aggressor does not merely inflict harm; he rewrites ownership and agency, converting the victim into a resource—material, reputational, and familial. This is why, in both lived reality and contemporary expert frameworks, economic violence is rarely treated as distinct from other forms: it functions as an infrastructure that renders additional modes of control cheaper and more durable.

Classical literature registers the same principle without specialized terminology: appropriation appears not as an episode, but as a recurring regime. Where society leaves violence "within the family," it simultaneously leaves intact the right to redistribute capital within that family—in favor of the stronger party.

Importantly, this mechanism does not operate along a unidirectional gender axis. In «Sister Carrie», Theodore Dreiser depicts an especially inconspicuous form of the same process. A de facto appropriation takes place—of housing, means of subsistence, and accumulated resources—yet it is recognized neither by society nor by law as violence. On the contrary, the redistribution is procedurally correct and therefore fully legitimate.

What is decisive in this configuration is that the victim cannot appeal to any recognized language of protection. No norm is violated, no crime is committed, and no event arises that would require intervention. Appropriation becomes

socially unrecognizable precisely because it occurs within the bounds of permissible order.

The horror of this configuration lies not in the intensity of damage, but in its imperceptibility. Appropriation requires no concealment, generates no stigma, and does not disrupt social equilibrium. Destruction proceeds quietly and, for that reason, conclusively—as the outcome of a mechanism that does not require violence in the narrow sense.

In contemporary contexts, this logic extends beyond monetary transfer. Appropriation may take the form of reputational seizure and identity control, allowing defamation to operate at scale and theft to be enacted through non-financial means, including the capture of administrative, symbolic, or legally consequential capacities.

It is therefore at this point that the language used to describe what is occurring becomes decisive. The same act may be named in different ways: theft, appropriation, care for the future, or reasonable redistribution of resources. The shift in language does not alter the fact of loss, but it radically alters its status. As a result, the taking of what belongs to another becomes socially unrecognizable precisely because it is accompanied by a correct explanation and sustained by a convincing public image.

In this configuration, violence requires neither concealment nor justification. It is not recognized as a problem because it does not disturb the appearance of normativity. The absence of condemnation is not the product of indifference, but

of non-recognition: society does not respond not because it approves, but because it lacks the language in which the act could be named.

Violence in these regimes operates not outside the norm, but through precise knowledge of its boundaries—and an equally precise calculation of the victim's moral constraints. Status, rather than secrecy, provides protection: role itself functions as social legitimation. It is for this reason that the next stage is moral rationalization, in which suffering is redefined as virtue and endurance as a marker of moral worth.

In these configurations, the morality of the victim does not function as a guarantee of protection, but as a vulnerability. Trust in intimacy and the sacralization of the family become the very material from which violence constructs its stability.

In intimate contexts, the boundaries between gift, loan, use, and appropriation are structurally opaque, limiting the possibility of retrospective proof and rendering loss institutionally indeterminate.

Dostoevsky: Morality as an Instrument of Violence

In the prose of «The Brothers Karamazov», «The Insulted and the Humiliated», and «Crime and Punishment,» Dostoevsky consistently registers a specific configuration of social violence in which morality does not constrain destruction but renders it permissible. Violence here requires neither concealment nor justification in terms of affect, passion, or contingency. It is

legitimized through moral narratives that relieve the social order of the need to intervene.

In «The Brothers Karamazov», the figure of Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov exemplifies violence as a stable and socially compatible mode of existence. His conduct within the family combines economic appropriation, moral degradation, and radical neglect, producing outcomes that include dispossession, psychological collapse, abandonment, and death. These consequences, however, do not translate into social sanction commensurate with their gravity.

What is decisive is not the absence of public awareness, but the form of social response. Disgust, ridicule, and moral condemnation are present, yet they remain confined to commentary and narrative containment. They do not develop into exclusion or isolation. Karamazov continues to be recognized as a legitimate subject of the social order: a property owner, a father, and a participant in communal life. The effects of violence are consistently displaced onto dependents, while his own social compatibility remains intact. Destruction appears as the fate of others, not as a disruption of his position within the order.

A comparable mechanism is visible within Karamazov's second marriage, where violence is enabled through the production of guilt and permanent moral indebtedness. By framing the marriage as an act of rescue and emphasizing the absence of dowry, Karamazov constructs an asymmetrical moral economy in which the wife is positioned as inherently obligated and culpable. Economic asymmetry is translated into moral debt, and moral debt into advance permission. Ordinary marital norms are suspended not retrospectively, but in

advance, through narrative framing.

Within this configuration, silence and submission are not recognized as indicators of harm, but as confirmation of the moral narrative itself. What matters is not the intensity of violence, but its discursive structure: economic inequality becomes moral obligation, moral obligation becomes legitimacy, and legitimacy ensures social non-recognition of harm. Psychological collapse and death are not registered as consequences of violence, but as contingent personal outcomes detached from responsibility.

This configuration attains particular linguistic precision in «The Insulted and the Humiliated». Here, violence takes the form of economic appropriation, followed by its retrospective moral rationalization. The aggressor does not deny the victim's material deprivation; on the contrary, he explicitly acknowledges it. He knows that she is starving. This knowledge does not interrupt the act of withholding resources, but becomes part of the subsequent discursive reframing.

What is crucial here is not misrecognition, but deliberate reclassification. The aggressor does not intervene in the victim's deprivation not in order to shape her condition, but in order to avoid naming his own act as theft. The narrative of the victim's moral "height" functions as a linguistic device that redefines appropriation as restraint and deprivation as ethical correctness.

The decisive operation occurs at the level of language. The money is not described as stolen, but as freely given. The refusal to return it is not framed as deprivation, but as a morally correct decision. Returning the money, the

aggressor argues, would have deprived the woman of a superior moral position —of the right to suffer fully, to remain righteous, and to condemn her offender from a position of moral elevation characteristic of “Schillerian natures.” Hunger is neither ignored nor contested; it is subordinated. She may have had nothing to eat, yet she is declared happy. To alleviate her material suffering would have constituted an illegitimate intervention—one that would have deprived her of the very “happiness” produced by moral superiority in suffering.

Within this configuration, the victim is granted neither protection nor the means of survival, but a role. She is permitted moral rightness while being denied the material conditions of existence. Moral dignity is substituted for life itself and functions as a terminal compensation. The outcome is death in poverty. At the same time, the causal chain remains socially unregistered: no explicit norm is violated, no force is applied, and no institutional threshold is crossed. Violence resides not only in the act of appropriation, but in the language that reclassifies it. Hunger becomes a sign of moral distinction, and suffering a condition of “happiness.”

A related configuration appears in «Crime and Punishment,» not at the level of consummated violence, but at the level of situational pressure. In the encounters involving Svidrigailov, the decisive element is not an act committed, but the interpretive logic through which proximity, presence, and access are transformed into entitlement. The mere fact of entering a private space is treated as a tacit concession, and the absence of immediate refusal is retrospectively read as permission. What is at work here is not moral justification, but the same mechanism of pre-emptive normalization: violence does not occur, yet the

conditions under which it could occur are rendered socially intelligible and narratively neutral. This configuration reinforces the central thesis that harm becomes possible not only through action, but through the normalization of interpretive thresholds that precede it.

Structural Reproduction Beyond Cultural Specificity

At this stage, it may be tempting to interpret the configuration described above as a product of national or historical particularities—of English domestic morality or of the Russian moral tradition of the nineteenth century. However, the recurrence of the same configuration across different cultural, legal, and religious contexts points to a different nature of the phenomenon. What is at stake here is not the specificity of countries or epochs, but the structural organization of social orders in which family, morality, and economic dependence operate in coordinated alignment. It is precisely this coordination, rather than cultural difference, that ensures the durability of the mechanism and renders it reproducible across changing historical settings.

Rupture as a Violation of Order

Against this background, «The Tenant of Wildfell Hall» demonstrates not so much the act of rupture itself as the limits of permissible female action within marriage. Withdrawal from a violent union is framed as a form of self-preservation, yet it cannot be openly realized. The husband refuses divorce, retains legal rights over both wife and child, and thereby renders any independent exit impossible within the framework of recognized order.

A stable asymmetry becomes visible: violence within marriage remains compatible with normativity, whereas the attempt at rupture—even in the form of flight—is perceived as a threat not merely to private relations, but to the very logic of property reproduction. The woman is not treated as an autonomous subject; she is construed as the husband's property, lacking the right to relocation, concealment, or separation without his consent.

Significantly, social pressure does not arise at the moment of formal norm violation. The heroine presents herself as a widow; her status is not openly contested, and she does not issue an explicit challenge to society. What becomes suspicious is not her solitude, but the absence of a legible biography—the gap between her presence and the impossibility of narrating her past in a socially legitimate way. It is precisely this biographical opacity that activates the mechanism of pressure: intrusive curiosity, gossip, and constant surveillance characteristic of a closed community.

Violence thus extends not only to the woman's body and economic existence, but also to her social memory. Marriage deprives her not only of freedom and resources, but of the right to her own biography. Autonomous existence without a sanctioned history becomes socially intolerable and demands continuous justification.

Motherhood as an Apparatus of Containment and Economic Violence

In «The Tenant of Wildfell Hall», motherhood does not function as a source of

additional protection for the victim. On the contrary, it becomes the central mechanism through which she is retained within a violent order. This is not a private moral dilemma, but a structural configuration in which motherhood serves simultaneously as a channel of economic pressure and as a means of legitimizing continued control.

Violence in this case is enacted not despite motherhood, but through it. The child is incorporated into the system of coercion as an instrument: through threats to the child's well-being, through manipulation of maternal responsibility, through the constant invocation of the consequences of any maternal action. Harm is inflicted not only upon the woman as an individual, but upon the woman as a mother—that is, through the very role that normative order designates as the highest form of social significance. This renders violence particularly stable, as it is masked as care and responsibility.

The economic dimension of this mechanism is not secondary. Motherhood provides social legitimation for economic pressure. The financial dependence of a woman with a child is interpreted not as the outcome of violence, but as evidence of her inadequacy. Need is not read as the result of resource deprivation, but as proof of poor judgment. Economic violence is thus reclassified as a moral category: lack of means becomes an argument against autonomy rather than a basis for protection.

Crucially, motherhood inserts the victim into a situation of logical deadlock. Leaving without the child is interpreted as immorality; leaving with the child as irresponsible risk; remaining as virtue. Any maternal action is pre-interpreted

against her. Exit from violence is not institutionalized as a legitimate scenario precisely because it violates normative representations of maternal responsibility. Motherhood therefore functions as the final mechanism by which the victim is fixed within the violent order, transforming it into an apparatus of stabilization.

Within this configuration, the child is not treated as a subject in need of protection, but as a means of redistributing pressure. Care for the child is mobilized as an argument against the right to rupture. Motherhood does not mitigate violence; it renders it more sophisticated and socially acceptable. It does not soften economic coercion; it renders it indisputable. For this reason, in «The Tenant of Wildfell Hall», rupture is perceived not as an act of self-preservation, but as a threat to order requiring sanction.

In this sense, morality and motherhood do not function as external constraints upon violence. On the contrary, they emerge as its most reliable instruments. Violence is enacted not in spite of them, but through them: through the moral demand for endurance and through maternal responsibility stripped of material support. This is why rupture is perceived as a violation of order, while violence itself remains compatible with it.

Within this configuration, the child is deployed not as an object of care, but as a channel of targeted violence. Actions formally directed toward the child are in fact addressed to the mother: through the inculcation of destructive practices, through the imposition of humiliating behavior, through the normalization of insult. The message is unambiguous: the father and husband possesses

sovereign authority—he may do anything, while the mother has no right to intervene. Violence is enacted through the child as a medium of power demonstration, and any resistance is interpreted as an encroachment upon paternal rights and marital hierarchy.

Motherhood thus becomes a social lever that simultaneously renders the victim morally obligated and economically immobilized. This, once again, is not an exception, but a reiteration of the general configuration: violence retains legitimacy so long as it is accompanied by control over resources and by a familiar moral interpretation of that control as “order”.

The Economic Threshold of Exit: Modernity as Modification Rather Than Rupture

Nineteenth-century classical literature registers the mechanism of intimate violence in its limit form, where exit from a violent order is either represented as a high-risk action—frequently associated with physical exhaustion, social erasure, or death—or excluded altogether as a structurally unavailable option. Modernity alters primarily the juridical visibility of exit: formal rupture—through divorce, separation, or protective measures—has become institutionally accessible. Yet the underlying architecture of the mechanism remains largely intact. Physical survival has become more probable, while social and economic stability following rupture remains structurally unsecured.

What has changed is not the logic of the mechanism, but its mode of operation.

Contemporary systems make exit formally imaginable without rendering it materially reproducible. Legal recognition of rupture does not automatically translate into sustainable autonomy. Instead, exit continues to be conditioned by a convergence of economic vulnerability, care obligations, reputational exposure, and moral expectation, which together define the practical limits of autonomy after separation.

Across contemporary welfare regimes, the economic burden of care and the absence of guaranteed post-separation stability continue to mark the boundary between formal exit and sustainable autonomy. **The practical non-payment of child support and restricted access to rental housing with children further consolidate the economic threshold of exit.** Contemporary systems facilitate formal rupture but delegate the conditions of post-separation survival to individual capacity, thereby transforming economic precarity into a mechanism of recurrent vulnerability rather than a resolved outcome of exit.

Although contemporary systems provide targeted support and protective measures, these interventions remain selective, capacity-bound, and non-reproducible at scale, leaving economic vulnerability and social opacity to operate jointly as mechanisms of recurrent dependency.
In contemporary conditions, reputational exposure acquires a new scale through digital infrastructures. Social discrediting, harassment, and narrative framing increasingly occur not only within local communities but across online platforms, where intimate relations, shared living arrangements, and access to personal data render digital identity structurally vulnerable. Forms of harm that lack clear legal designation—or are classified as private opinion, speech, or

interpersonal conflict—remain largely beyond effective legal remedy, despite their capacity to produce tangible economic, social, and psychological damage. As a result, reputational violence operates with high efficiency and low institutional friction, reinforcing dependency and deterring exit even where formal legal protections nominally exist. This contemporary expansion of reputational harm is not conceptually alien to the nineteenth-century corpus. Dostoevsky repeatedly registers the same logic whereby moral narration and social commentary function as instruments of coercion: the victim is rendered intelligible to others through accusatory framing, while the aggressor's position remains compatible with normativity. Digital infrastructures do not alter this logic; they scale it, accelerating circulation and intensifying the consequences of reputational illegibility without necessarily converting harm into a legally actionable category.

Assistance may interrupt individual episodes of violence, but it does not establish a durable, universally accessible pathway toward post-separation stability. As a result, the conditions that initially sustained dependency are reactivated in modified form, allowing the mechanism to resume its operation under altered circumstances.

Violence therefore increasingly requires no direct coercion to persist. It is sustained through economic asymmetry, reputational mechanisms, and moralized expectations of endurance—particularly in relation to caregiving and motherhood. While the specific expressions of these pressures vary across legal and cultural contexts, their structural effect remains consistent: autonomy after rupture is conditional, precarious, and socially costly.

Modernity thus does not abolish the mechanism described in classical literature; it reconfigures its visibility. The threshold of exit shifts from an institutional barrier to a social and economic one. Violence remains compatible with normative order, while rupture continues to entail the loss of stability, legibility, and support. Exit becomes legally possible without becoming socially normative.

In this sense, contemporary conditions do not render nineteenth-century literary analysis obsolete. On the contrary, they confirm its analytical relevance. The mechanisms traced in classical texts persist under modified forms, demonstrating that changes in legal frameworks and social vocabulary do not necessarily dismantle the structural conditions through which violence retains social compatibility. Literature remains instructive not because it mirrors present realities directly, but because it captures the underlying logic whose movement continues across changing historical landscapes.

Law as a Reflection of Social Automatisms and the Inertia of Reform

Classical literature consistently registers the absence of autonomy in normative structures. Formal legal order does not function as an independent protective barrier; instead, it either directly sustains existing hierarchies or reproduces them through procedural neutrality and institutional inaction. Legal vulnerability thus coincides with social illegibility: recourse to the system does not produce protection, but merely transforms the mode through which pressure is exercised. Even where normative change is formally possible, its practical effect is determined less by the content of legal rules than by entrenched habits

of interpretation, moral expectations, and distributions of admissibility. For this reason, transformation of normative form does not entail transformation of the underlying mechanism. Modernity has elaborated legal language and procedure, yet it has not altered the basic architecture within which family structures, economic dependency, moral obligation, and social pressure continue to operate in coordinated alignment. Law, in this configuration, registers change retrospectively and selectively, reflecting prevailing social automatisms rather than contesting them.

This limitation corresponds to a classical sociological observation formulated by **Gustave Le Bon**: laws and institutions are susceptible to change, whereas moral habits exhibit the greatest inertia. So long as this inertia persists, expectations of transforming social practice through normative correction alone remain unfounded.

Conclusion

The analysis undertaken here demonstrates that violence within intimate and familial relations persists not as an anomaly or moral deviation, but as a structurally permissible condition of social order. Across nineteenth-century literature and contemporary contexts alike, the mechanism reproduces itself through a stable asymmetry of consequences: violent conduct does not entail automatic social exclusion, whereas attempts at exit generate material, reputational, and symbolic costs. Law, rather than functioning as an autonomous protective barrier, largely reflects entrenched social automatisms, registering change retrospectively while leaving underlying moral expectations intact. As

long as exit from violence remains unestablished as a normative scenario—and is instead experienced as a departure from order—the mechanism retains its social compatibility and capacity for reproduction. Classical literature remains analytically relevant precisely because it captures this logic at the level of structure rather than event, revealing not exceptional cruelty, but the durable conditions under which violence continues to operate without disruption.